

Prospects for Peace in Syria

Written by Hisham H. Ahmed

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HISHAM H. AHMED, APR 26 2012

Given its many structural and functional detriments, the Assad regime and its supporters understand that any meaningful reform in Syria today will, by necessity, mean the regime's end, given its lack of representation and legitimacy. The regime is made up mainly of Alawites, a minority sect in Syria, which comprises about ten percent of the population. Certainly, the regime's continued repression of its people for over four decades has put its legitimacy in question.

The question now is not whether the regime will crumble, but rather when, how, by whom and under what circumstances. The answers to these questions will have a profound impact on the future of Syria and the Arab world writ large.

Reflecting on the way the crises in Syria and the rest of the Arab World are being handled, both internally and externally, one cannot help but see the striking similarities to the international environment exactly a century ago. On the eve of World War I, the Arab people were quite restless against their Ottoman rulers. Unrest in the Arab region was caused by the Ottomans' systematic assault on Arab identity and dignity, as the Ottoman Empire pursued a vigorous campaign of de-Arabization and Turkification.

Overwhelmed by continued Ottoman oppression, many Arabs willingly allied themselves with the European infidels in order to rid themselves of their immediate Ottoman oppressors. As the Arabic proverb puts it: "some Arabs were like somebody who is drowning and willing to hold onto a straw." Of course, the Great Powers, particularly Britain and France, did not merely keenly observe the unrest, but actually helped instigate it with promises of Arab independence if they fought on the side of the Allies. One may recall the intricate Great Arab Rebellion of the Sherif Husein of Mecca.

Certainly, there were many Arabs, particularly in Bilad Al-Sham, Greater Syria, who never believed that the way out from Ottoman rule lied in embracing the deceptive promises of the British and French powers: to them, attaining freedom required more than a frustrated drive toward independence.

Today, the global powers are similarly divided, particularly with regards to the regional transformation being brought about by the Arab Spring. Indeed, a Sykes-Picot-like formula seems to be in the making. External attempts to derail the Arab Revolutions and set them off their tracks are plentiful, as evidenced by events in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Tunisia and, most notably, in Syria.

Therefore, following the widely-discredited Iraqi and Libyan model of regime change would have catastrophic consequences, not only for Syria itself but also for the region as a whole. Syria's geostrategic importance should not be underestimated. Widespread instability and divisions in Syria can have far reaching effects on all neighboring countries; Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Turkey, and Iraq. For sure, the state of anarchy and attempts at division characterizing Libya's and Iraq's recent history are incompatible with the Syrian people's goals and ambitions.

Both Libya and Iraq have unfortunately been turned into hotbeds of different external intelligence agencies. Western calls for arming the Syrian opposition are not meant to help the Syrian people, but rather to turn the country into a dumping ground for weapons manufacturers everywhere. Making Syria another Lebanon, where every desirous

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power tries to unleash its greed, aggression and/or maximize its interests, goes against the Syrian people's struggle to rid themselves of the brutal tyrant. The Lebanonization of Syria would turn an already awful situation into an even more dreadful disaster.

The polarization of the international community over the Syrian crisis— evidenced by Russia and China vetoing the U.N. Security Council Resolution on Syria in February — pleases the Assad regime, because it appears to have revived world divisions that are reminiscent of the Cold War.

At the same time, it is compellingly obvious that conventional solutions for the Syrian dilemma will not work. The Assad regime's military option has run its course. Relying on the military option to get rid of the regime will, in all likelihood, not work either. Hence, the need for a creative and an innovative way out of the current quagmire is more pressing than ever before.

For all intents and purposes, the solution should be mainly Arab in origin. Nonetheless, sending only Arab monitors to the country proved wholly inadequate in the face of the Assad regime's brutal bombardment of its own people. Therefore, the Kofi Annan mission, jointly sanctioned by the Arab League and the United Nations, is quite timely despite its many difficulties.

However, change in Syria requires more than an exclusively state-centered solution. Civil societies in the Arab world have proven to be effective tools for reconfiguring political systems. Thus, the already active Arab Street needs to be effectively mobilized in support of the Syrian people. This, in addition to deploying an organized, credible Arab and international peacekeeping force with the goal of maintaining law and order and protecting the Syrian people, can begin having the desired effects. It should be remembered, however, that the Arab League once authorized the Syrian military to enter Lebanon under the aegis of the Arab Deterrence Forces, ostensibly to end the civil war there. They didn't leave for over two decades.

In the final analysis, as hard as it may appear, the way out of the Syrian crisis must spring from the Syrian people's ideas of freedom and not from an external Western military intervention. After all, the roots of the political problems in Syria today are a direct result of French colonial policies that lasted until the end of World War II.

As is widely known, today's Arab dictators are not the leaders the Arab masses struggled to institute in power during their quests for independence from the Ottomans and/or European colonial powers. The same mistake mustn't be repeated. Accordingly, it is essential that future Syrian leaders reflect national ambitions instead of the aspirations of Syria's lukewarm friends. These powers, which manipulate Syrian suffering and bloodshed to advance their own interests, are not much different from the Assad regime, even if one side wears a seemingly glowing mask. The choice need not be between the decadent Assad dictatorship and the revival of the increasingly apparent Western drive towards exploitation.

In sum, any solution to the Syrian dilemma will, by necessity, have to be Syrian Arab in nature.

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